DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 021 PS 024 400

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TITLE The Objectives of Kindergarten Education in Austria.
PUB DATE Sep 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education (5th, Paris, France, September 7-9, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; Curriculum; Decision Making; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Environment; *Educational Objectives; Educational Philosophy; Foreign Countries; *Kindergarten; Open Education; *Outcomes of Education; Primary Education; Questionnaires; Standards; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Austria (Vienna); Buhler (Charlotte)

ABSTRACT

This study explored the priorities of kindergarten teachers in Austria along with the factors determining implementation of their educational objectives. A large-scale empirical survey of the conditions fostering and hindering child development in the kindergarten environment was conducted by the Charlotte Buhler Institute in 1994. A total of 1,232 kindergarten teachers were asked to comment on what they considered to be their major educational objectives. A questionnaire was disseminated consisting of 38 objectives which teachers evaluated on a four-point scale. Results indicated that the Austrian kindergarten teachers considered these educational objectives most important: (1) linguistic skills; (2) independent decision-making; (3) conflict resolution skills; (4) enjoyment of physical activity; and (5) fulfillment of emotional needs. From the teachers comments, it is apparent that a change in values in Austria has resulted in a decrease in importance and use of discipline and obedience as educational objectives. New methodological and didactic concepts need to be developed for the following topics: religious education, frustration level, and the understanding of technological relationships. Perspectives for future kindergarten education include the formulation of quality standards and the development of an appropriate open curriculum. (BGC)

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THE OBJECTIVES OF KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION IN AUSTRIA

Paper presented at the 5th European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education
Paris/Sorbonne, France , 7,8,9 sept. 1995

INTRODUCTION

The Charlotte Bühler -Institute was established in 1992 in Vienna, Austria. With the help of the Federal Ministry of Science and Research this Institute was founded in order to engage in practice - oriented early childhood research. The scientific findings are made available as a basis for decision making.

In paying tribute to the outstanding achievements of Charlotte Bühler in the field of developmental psychology the Institute was named „Charlotte Bühler - Institute". Charlotte Bühler is known as the founder of empirical early childhood research, which gained world fame as the „Vienna School".

BASIS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Features of the Austrian Kindergarten

The Austrian kindergarten is an institution where three to six year-old children are taken care of. With the completion of the age of six a child enters school.
There are more than 4000 kindergartens in Austria, 62% of which take care of three to six year-olds. In the entire state six out of seven children attend a kindergarten at least the last year prior to school. Half of all the kindergartens are open all day.

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The kindergarten laws of the nine federal provinces define kindergarten as an educational institution and emphasize its pedagogical mission. Kindergarten is supposed to complement family education but is not regarded as a substitute.

Curriculum for Kindergarten Education in Austria

During the seventies, an open curriculum relating to the education of children aged three to six in Austrian kindergartens was drawn up; this curriculum is footed on the following 11 dimensions of early childhood education (Niederle, Michelic & Lenzeder, 1987):

- emotional education,
- social behaviour,
- sexual education,
- values,
- religious education,
- creativity,
- cognitive development,
- language development,
- physical education,
- learning and performance orientation,
- environmental competence

However, social change, new scientific findings and practical experiences collected from kindergarten teachers all prompt the modification of existing educational concepts.

Hence, the transformation of values of duties and acceptance into values of self-fulfillment and flexibility - which has taken place in the developed countries since the seventies - forms the basis of changing educational concepts and objectives within our society (Klages,1988; 1993).

ISSUES OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

This change in values also constitutes a major challenge for kindergarten education. Therefore the following questions are of interest:

What are the priorities of kindergarten teachers in Austria today? Which are the factors determining the actual implementation of the educational objectives previously defined?

METHODOLOGY

Based on these theoretical issues, a large scale empirical survey of the conditions fostering and hampering children's individual development within the kindergarten environment was conducted by the Charlotte Bühler-Institute (Charlotte Bühler-Institut, 1994). Within the framework of this study 1232 kindergarten teachers were asked to comment on what they personally considered as being their major educational objectives and on the chances of implementing these objectives in practice (Charlotte Bühler-Institut, 1995).

Identifying how various environmental conditions at kindergarten, such as the size of the infant classroom, group size, supply of toys and learning materials, staffing etc. determine the implementation of specific educational objectives, is yet another main purpose of this study.

The questionnaire of the Charlotte Bühler Institute consists of 38 educational objectives which the teachers had to evaluate on a four-step scale (I consider this objective „very important", „somewhat important", „less important", „not important"). The implementation of these objectives under present conditions were evaluated according to: I can put these goals into practice „very well", „quite well", „less well", „not well" (Table 1).

Table 1

Which educational objectives do you consider important in your work? Which goals can you implement and how well under present concitions in your kindergarten?

	I consider				I can implement			
	very impor tant	some what impor tant	less impor tant	not impor tant	very well	quite well	less well	not well
Perception								
Aestethic awareness								
Development of artistic abilities								
Development of gross motor skills								
Linguistic expression								
Transfer of traditional values								
Problem solving								
Discipline / obedience								
Concentration / endurance								
Education based on religious values								
Cooperative behaviour								
Development of fine motor skills								
Sex education								
Understanding of partnership roles								
Frustration level								
Conflict resolution								
Transfer of cultural customs (seasonal curriculum)								
Sensory development								
Language skills								
Critical confrontation with societal values								
Achievment motivation								
Order / cleanliness								
Stimulation of individual talents / interests								
Independent decision-making								
Self-assertion / self -awareness								
Critical environmental and consumer behaviour								
Fulfillment of emotional basic needs								
Preparation for school								
Acquisition of practical abilities / daily routine								
Familiarization with nature								
Health education								
Ability to love / bonding								
Understanding of technical relationships								
Enjoyment of physical activity								
Ability to improvise								
Memory								
Promoting the enjoyment of daily experiences								
Creativity								

The educational objectives gained through this evaluation were translated into scales and contrasted to to implementation possibilities. The discussion is based on the differences between the importance and the possible implementation of the educational objectives, as well as the influence of environmental conditions.

The computer program SPSS was used for the statistical evaluation of the data.

The results inform the authorities which objectives are of importance for kindergarten education, and to which degree these objectives are influenced by environmental conditions. The findings also point out which relevant socio- political goals are presenty neglected.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The importance of educational objectives and the re-evaluation of these goals by kindergarten teachers.

The Austrian kindergarten teachers unanimously consider the following educational objectives most important: linguistic skills, independent decision-making, the ability for conflict resolution, the enjoyment of physical activity, and the fulfillment of emotional basic needs.

Because of our fast-changing society these objectives represent values which are important for children at present and in the future.

In accordance with the change in values which has taken place in the developed countries since the seventies it is clear that discipline and obedience as educational objectives have become less important for kindergarten teachers. Traditional values and cultural customs, education based on religious values, and motivation achievement are no longer priorities. It is, however, interesting that the lower-ranking educational goals have a wider variance. In the areas of „religious education", „discipline and obedience", and „motivation achievement" there are teachers who are somehow more involved than others.

New educational goals such as sex education and technological understanding have played traditionally a minor role in the kindergarten and are placed accordingly at the lower end of the scale, even though they are of great significance in today's society and in the media. There are two possible explanations: One, teachers regard sex education rather a task for the family than for the kindergarten. Two, teachers are often self-conscious when dealing with a child's sexuality. The lack of interest of female educators in technical relationships is clearly the result of gender socialization.

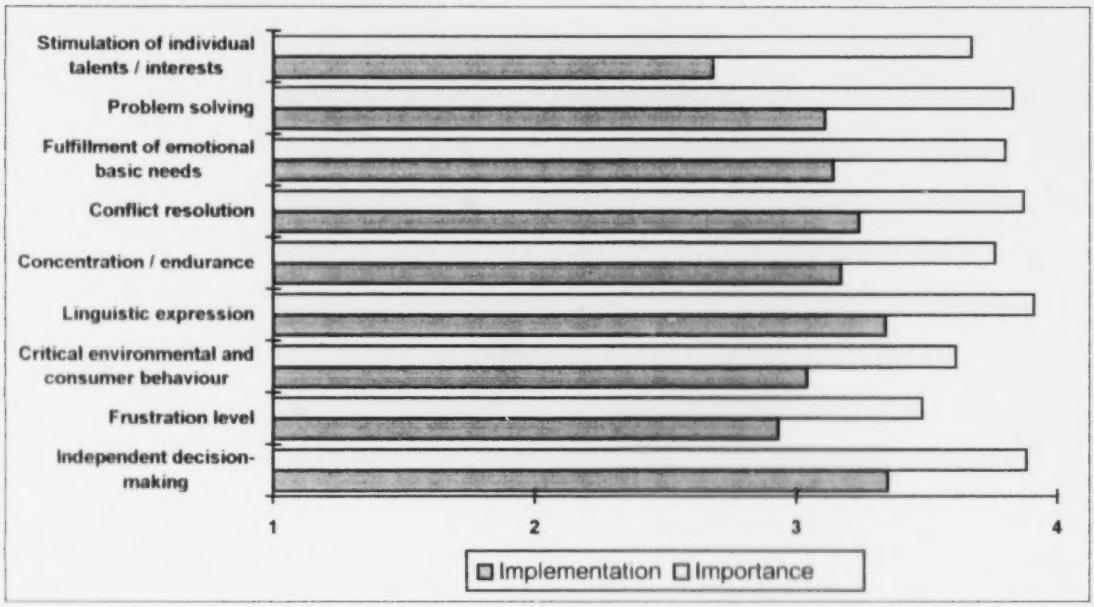
The objective „critical analysis of social values" is placed low on the scale, a fact that leads to the speculation that kindergarten teachers tend to emphasize a harmonious conflict-free atmosphere more so than getting involved in promoting critical thinking skills. This ability, however, is indispensable for the analysis of differing values in our society.

This value scale leads to new thematic topics for the training and continuing education of kindergarten teachers.

The difference between the importance and the implementation of educational objectives

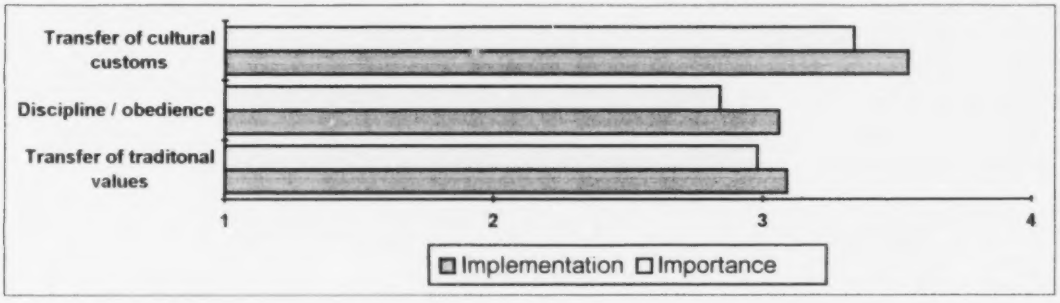
The results show that under their present working conditions the teachers have few possibilities to implement the goals they consider most important. This is especially true for the promotion of individual talents, the fulfillment of emotional basic needs, for conflict resolution, for critical consumer and environmental behaviour, the level of frustration, and independent decision-making (fig. 1)

Fig 1: The difference between the importance and the implementation of educational objectives



On the other hand, all those goals that were regarded less important by the teachers could be easily put into practice (fig. 2).

Fig 2: The difference between the importance and the implementation of educational objectives



Content of the educational objectives

In order to structure the educational objectives, a factor analysis was applied. The following four factors were derived from this statistical procedure

- Artistic and creative educational objectives
- Learning objectives and achievement goals
- Critical-innovative educational objectives
- Traditional goals

According to the teachers, artistic and creative goals as well as learning and achievement objectives are easy to integrate into the existing curriculum, whereas it is difficult to incorporate the critical-innovative objectives.

Conditions for the implementation of educational goals in the kindergarten.

The implementation of the critical-innovative goals depends above all on group size. Reducing group size is an important prerequisite.

The empirical data of this survey show that more space and a better supply of toys and learning materials is the overall criterion for incorporating artistic and creative objectives, traditional goals, or learning and achievement objectives. Cost saving measures regarding equipment have a negative influence on the effectiveness of kindergarten education.

New methodological-didactic concepts for the implementation of educational objectives.

On the one hand, Austrian teachers are well trained in applying the established objectives, such as transmitting traditional values, familiarization with nature, sensory development, and stimulation of fine motor skils. On the other hand, however, suitable methods and models need to be developed and tested in order to guarantee successful implementation of emancipatory and critical-innovative objectives.

The educational cognitive concepts of the seventies are still successfully used by Austrian kindergarten teachers for compensatory education. Less effective, however, is the stimulation of individual children's interests and talents. Many teachers have not been trained well in individualized instruction, and existing conditions in the kindergarten are often unsatisfactory for executing such a goal. Apart from the difference between the importance and the realistic execution of this objective it is disturbing that more than 25 % of all teachers consider this goal inappropriate.

The empirical results show that new methodological and didactic concepts need to be developed for the following topics: religious education, frustration level and the understanding of technological relationships. Up-to-date models for sex education are indispensable considering the sexual abuse of children.

FUTURE EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Two perspectives for future kindergarten education are the result of the entire empirical study of the Charlotte Bühler Institute: one, the formulation of quality standards, and two, an appropriate open curriculum for the kindergarten. The future research projects of the Institute plan to focus on these two issues.

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